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ABSTRACT

Designed for students who have grammatical problems, the syntactic approach presented in this paper helps explain the process of revision, and should be used only after a student has written a draft. The paper suggests that the students' hypothetical objective can be to understand how every word in any sentence is syntactically connected to the basic sentence pattern, and explains the four-step approach, categorized according to prepositional phrases, subjects and verbs, subordinate clauses, and gerundives (participles). The paper lists the following advantages of this approach: (1) students work with only their own writing; (2) the approach emphasizes and helps define revision as a separate process, starts with a simple concept and expands, entails automatic review of all preceding steps, and focuses on what is right rather than what is wrong; (3) students study only those grammatical concepts directly related to their problems in writing, and experience an early sense of success; (4) students' work is easily and quickly checked; and (5) much of the instruction can be done through simple handouts. (EL)

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The Sequential, Syntactic, Remedial Tutorial

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Biographical Statement: Dr. Vavra received his Ph.D. in Russian and has published a political study of a major Russian novel, but has been teaching English at Shenandoah College for the last eight years because of a desire to help students express their own thoughts clearly. He founded and edits Syntax in the Schools, a newsletter devoted to the development of a coherent sequence of grammatical instruction for grades 3-12. This paper is a revised version of "A Sequential, Syntactic Approach to Remedial Tutorials," presented at the 7th Annual Conference of the East Central Region of the Writing Centers Association, May 3,1985.

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Abstract of "The Sequential, Syntactic, Remedial Tutorial

Most research studies that claim there is no connection between a student's knowledge of grammar and his/her ability to write do not even consider the question of errors. This paper presents a four-step approach for having students learn simple grammatical concepts and then **use them to analyze their own papers.** The approach, which helps students avoid fragments, run-ons, comma-splices, and dangling modifiers, is the first part of the author's grammar course for teachers. A statistical study of student teachers indicates that the approach can increase T-unit length, subordinate clauses per main clause, etc. and **decrease** common errors simultaneously. In essence, the approach is based on Vygotsky's concept of "the zone of proximal development."

The Sequential, Syntactic, Remedial Tutorial

I recently had a manuscript about teaching writing and grammar returned by a fairly prestigious journal. One of the readers' comments was "This is merely a description of the writers (sic) grammar based writing course. . . . He appears to be uninformed about 15 years of composition research." Lest any of you share this reader's misperception, I would like to preface my remarks by stating that I am quite familiar with the research, that I consider it invalid, and that I would love to explain why it is so. Invited here, however, to speak about a specific syntactic tutorial, I will be happy to discuss the larger questions between or after meetings.

Designed for students who have problems with subject/verb agreement, fragments, run-ons, comma-splices, and/or dangling modifiers, this syntactic approach should not be used with students who have difficulty generating text. Focussing such students' attention on grammar will only further inhibit their writing. Used only after a student has a draft, syntactic analysis emphasizes, and in part explains, the process of **revision.**

Sentence-combining exercises were not meant to help students correct errors. In their well-known studies, for example, Mellon and O'Hare did not even count errors, even though as far back as 1965 Kellogg Hunt wrote: "As more nonclausal structures are packed into a clause the likelihood of stylistic faults occurring increases apace. The greater the congestion the greater the hazard." [1] In her study of eleven pre-medical students, Suzanne E. Jacobs even suggests that we should expect students who make few

grammatical errors to start making more as they increase the "predication load" of their sentences. [2] And Carol David and Thomas Bubolz, describing a sentence-combining approach geared to correct errors, indicate that their students showed **decreases** in words/clause and words/T-unit, two of the major measures of syntactic maturity. [3] Thus, even with sentence-combining, a focus on errors leads students to write shorter, safer sentences.

Traditional approaches likewise do not help for several reasons: they are not directly related to the student's own writing, they are too simple, and they are definition oriented. It is a common complaint that students can do all the exercises in their grammar book, but, when they write, they still make mistakes. This shouldn't really surprise us: as long ago as 1969 John Mellon wrote:

> it may very well be the case that conventional grammar study fails to promote growth of syntactic fluency not because of the usage practice which it features, but rather because of the hundreds of simply structured and altogether childish sentences which it employs for parsing exercises. [4]

Every handbook or workbook I have seen, moreover, fragments the system of syntax and focuses on definitions: in the exercises, students look for subjects and verbs, **or** for subordinate clauses, **or** for gerunds, etc. As she does the exercise, in other words, the student's attention is already focused on a specific syntactic construction. But as this same student works on her own paper, she doesn't know whether to look for errors in clause structure, verbals, or subject/verb agreement. Indeed, asked to identify the subordinate clauses in her own paper, this student would have

great difficulty. Our students' problem is often not in **correcting** the error, but in **recognizing** it.

The solution I have found works on the principle of what Vygotsky calls the student's "zone of proximal development." [5] If I understand Vygotsky, what he means by the "zone of proximal development" is simply that given a body of knowledge "X," it is easy to understand related concepts "Y," but the concepts "Z" cannot be easily, if at all, understood, until one has basically mastered "Y." "Y" is within the "zone of proximal development." Once "Y" is mastered, the zone expands to include "Z." To use an analogy from math, if one can add, then one's knowledge of addition places multiplication within the zone of proximal development, but exponents are outside the "zone" until one has mastered multiplication. Vygotsky illustrates the zone as two concentric circles: the area within the inner circle represents mastered concepts; the area between the circles is the zone. As the inner circle expands, the outer one does likewise.

Vygotsky's concept can be applied to the teaching of syntax such that students can literally see their zone expanding. In this case, of course, the zone refers to syntactic connections rather than to math. Whereas most students simply see a mass of words on a page, the students' **hypothetical** objective can be to understand how every word in any sentence is syntactically connected to the basic sentence pattern. This hypothetical objective would thus represent the outer potential limit of the inner circle. Obviously, I am not suggesting this as a **practical** objective for remedial tutorials, but I do wish to suggest the **direction** in which remediation should be working. In effect, this procedure for remedial situations is the first part of method I use to teach grammar to teachers.

Most students already understand that adjectives are connected to

nouns or pronouns and that adverbs go to verbs. Since most prepositional phrases function as either adjectives or adverbs, and since it is not at all unusual to find between a third and a half of all the words in a text in prepositional phrases, starting instruction with prepositional phrases almost immediately expands the student's sense of assimilated knowledge to account for over half of the connections that need to be made. With prepositional phrases within the zone of assimilated knowledge, students find it easier to locate the subjects, finite verbs, and complements in their own writing. Having mastered this basic sentence pattern, they can then begin to distinguish subordinate clauses. Clauses assimilated, the zone of proximal development expands to include verbals (gerunds, gerundives, and infinitives): any verb that they have not underlined twice has to be a verbal. As they move through this process, students clearly see that they understand more and more of the connections among words.

Using the Method

Students should work, whenever possible, with texts--paragraphs or short essays, **preferably their own.** If the text is typed and double spaced, as most students' papers are, all the work can be done right on that paper. Although when working with a class I usually give a short description of the eight parts of speech, the best place to start is with the prepositional phrase.

1. Prepositional Phrases

Simply have the student identify prepositional phrases by placing them

in parentheses. The student does not need to memorize a list of prepositions. By looking at a list while he is working on his paper, he will inductively learn most of the prepositions. Given a couple of examples, he can also distinguish phrases ("since breakfast") from clauses ("since they arrived").

A student came in to see me: she wanted help getting subjects to agree with verbs. I told her to take the list of prepositions and place her prepositional phrases in parentheses. She said she didn't want to learn about prepositions: her problem was with subjects and verbs. It wasn't. It was with prepositional phrases. Numerous errors in subject/verb agreement are made because students confuse the object of a preposition with the subject of a verb. Simply having students set off prepositional phrases will help some of them see and correct their errors in agreement, just as this girl did.

In presenting prepositional phrases, I also introduce compounding ("The book was about life and death.") and the concept of ellipsis. The only thing that needs to be said about compounding is "Any construction can be compounded." Students can take it from there without special instruction in compound subjects, compound verbs, compound clauses, etc. Ellipsis is extremely important in the later steps of the process, but it can be helpful even with prepositional phrases. In a sentence such as "They wrote to Mary in Michigan and Bob in South Dakota," it is easy to put parentheses around "to Mary," but what does one do with "Bob"? Many students prefer to consider an ellipsed "to" in front of Bob, which then goes in parentheses also.

2. Subjects and Verbs.

In the next step, the student underlines all subjects and finite verbs and labels simple complements. (If the student is working on a different paper, he places parentheses around prepositional phrases first: the steps are sequential with each paper.) A few students will have trouble distinguishing finite verbs from verbals: in these cases workbook exercises prove helpful, but the simple sentence test--"Will the verb function as the verb in a short sentence?"--usually provides help enough.

Numerous students with a fairly decent background in grammar are surprised by the rule that a subject/verb pattern has to have both parts either inside, or, more likely, outside a prepositional phrase: the subject cannot be in and the verb out, or vice versa. With prepositional phrases visually set off in parentheses, students are forced to find the syntactic, and not just semantic, subject of the verb.

I have watched many students underline the subjects and verbs in their own writing, and I have seen many of them correcting errors in agreement as they did so, even though they were not told to correct errors; others automatically added previously omitted "-ed" inflexions.

Complements can also be taught fairly simply: if nothing answers the question "what?"after the verb, there is no complement. If the word that answers the question is an adjective, then the complement is a predicate adjective; if the verb in any way implies an equality between the subject and the complement, then the complement is a predicate noun; if the word indicates "to" or "for" whom something is done, the complement is an indirect object; otherwise it is a direct object. This system, which focuses on meaning, avoids the whole problem of memorizing a long--and incomplete--list of linking verbs. It is also helpful for students such as

the one who wrote that "Education needs to be educated."

3. Subordinate clauses

As students underline subjects and verbs, they will quickly see that many sentences have more than one subject/verb pattern. The next step, therefore, is subordinate clauses.

There is only one useful definition of a subordinate clause--it is a clause that functions as a noun, adjective, or adverb within another clause. Bracketing subordinate clauses is a helpful visual aid which does not require rewriting the sentence. Since we have a tendency to place subordinate clauses toward the end of the sentence, students should begin their analysis with the **last** subject/verb pattern in a sentence and work backwards, checking first to see if the clause functions as a noun, then as an adjective, finally as an adverb. If it has any of these functions, it gets bracketed and labeled. Students are annually amazed to find brackets within brackets within brackets in their own papers. Compound main clauses--subject/verb patterns with all the words that go to them, **including all subordinate clauses**--can be separated with a heavy vertical line: everything to the left of the line goes to one main clause; everything to the right, to the other.

Some students may need a review of the basic rules of sentence punctuation, but they will now be able to recognize that something is wrong with their fragments, run-ons and comma-splices. They do not need to know the names of these errors; since they will know what is supposed to be in the sentence, they will be able to correct it. This system teaches students what is considered right, not what is wrong. Knowledge of the rules of

punctuation has not helped heretofore primarily because most students can't distinguish the structure of their own clauses.

4. Gerundives

The last of the major problems is the dangling or misplaced modifier. Many such modifiers are gerundives. With finite verbs underlined twice, any other verbs have to be verbals (gerunds, gerundives, or infinitives). Students can recognize most gerundives by their participial form ("-ing," or "-ed"). Since participles function as nouns or adjectives, the student should check to see if the participle functions as a noun--a subject, direct object, predicate noun, or object of a preposition. If it does not, then it is a gerundive. Most traditional texts refer to gerundives as "participles" and emphasize their adverbial function. Although it is true that they have an adverbial function, when students have problems with them, they have problems with the adjectival function; hence I prefer the term "gerundive": the rhyme with "adjective" is another aid to understanding. Students can figure out what the gerundive logically modifies by making a question with "Who/what is/are" before the gerundive.

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These four steps are not only sequential, but also cumulative: whenever a student starts working with a new text, he begins with prepositional phrases and takes the steps in order. The tutor can decide how quickly a student should pass from one step to the next as well as how many of the steps the student needs to do. There is, for example, no pressing reason to do step four if the student has no trouble with dangling modifiers. Some students, on their first visit, have placed parentheses

around all their prepositional phrases and labeled most of the subjects and verbs; other students have worked on prepositional phrases for two or even three papers. One of the advantages of the approach is that the tutor can quickly determine which step the student needs to work on. There are numerous other advantages:

1. The student works only with his/her own writing.

2. The approach emphasizes and helps define revision as a separate process.

3. The student starts with a simple concept (prepositional phrases) and expands from there.

4. Each new text entails automatic review of all preceding steps.

5. The student focuses on what is "right," i.e., how sentences actually work, rather than on what is "wrong." There is no need to teach students to identify comma-splices, fragments, run-ons, etc.

6. The student studies only those grammatical concepts which directly relate to his/her problem in writing.

7. Most students experience an early sense of success as:
a.) they see how much of the text they can analyze, and/or
b.) they see how quickly they can correct their own errors.

8. The students' work is easily and quickly checked, whether it be the parentheses around the prepositional phrases, the underlining of subjects and verbs, or the brackets around clauses.

9. Much of the instruction can be done through simple handouts, thereby saving conference time for discussions of problems.

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Although I have dealt here only with the question of errors, this process can also be applied to stylistic concerns--putting the main idea in

the main clause, varying structure by changing clauses to gerundives or vice-versa, and, of course, using parallel constructions. These are some of the things we focus on in Syntax in the Schools. They are also what I'm primarily interested in when I use this method in my Freshman writing course. During the past semester, students in that course were given five hours of in-class instruction in this method. Pre- and post-tests based on revisions of Hunt's "Aluminum" passage indicate an 11.7% increase in words/main clause from 11.67 to 13.03, significant at .05. Students in my Modern Grammar course, a course which includes no writing, demonstrated a 19.1% increase, from 13.56 to 16.16, significant at .01. A control group had no significant change. This method, therefore, does not result in students writing shorter, less mature sentences.

Footnotes

1. Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels. Research Report No. 3. Urbana, Ill.:NCTE. 1965. 152.

2. Composing and Coherence: The Writing of Eleven Pre-Medial Students. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics. 1982. 55.

3. The Writing Lab Newsletter. 9, No.8 (April, 1985).

4. Transformational Sentence Combining. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1969. 63.

5. Lev S. Vygotsky. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Ed. Michael Cole, et al. Boston: Harvard

University Press, 1978. 79-91.